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ABSTRACT

To determine whether students gain more knowledge and stronger impressions from reading a play or from viewing the play on videotape, two groups of college students were presented with an excerpt from Arthur Miller's "Incident at Vichy." One group was to read the excerpt and the other group was to view the same excerpt from a public television production. After the students had read or viewed the excerpt they answered questions designed to test their comprehension and also the emotional impact of the two kinds of presentations. The students were also given a preliminary set of questions intended to insure that the two groups did not vary significantly in their attitudes toward viewing and reading or toward the subject matter of the script. Both groups of students received instructions to pay attention to detail because they would be questioned afterwards. Results showed that students seemed to have stronger emotional reactions to visual presentations than to the printed word. The viewers of the videotape seemed to find the play more interesting and emotionally affecting, and a higher percentage of students actually changed opinions of the play as a result of viewing the excerpt. The findings suggest that regardless of how a teacher may respond to visual presentations, students generally find various machines to be entertaining enhancers of the written word. (HOD)

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Human Teaching and Machine Entertainment: Should This Marriage Be Saved?

Rebecca Bell-Metereau

As English teachers wrestle with videotape equipment, projectors, and various other machines, they may begin to wonder if their efforts are worthwhile. Why should we bother to entertain students while we teach them? A decade ago, such a question would have sounded old-fashioned or even reactionary. During the late sixties many college teachers displayed an almost obsessive concern with how to make English courses relevant, how to capture the attention and imaginations of the students, how to transform the drab technical approach to literature and writing into an entertaining adventure. Over a decade later, fewer and fewer teachers are worrying about whether or not their classes are entertaining. In the face of ever-mounting mechanical errors (or at least a perception that such is the case), teachers turn once again to the notion of mechanical perfection (or even a semblance of adequacy) as the most reasonable demand of the composition teacher. Professors of literature, resentful of students' inability to comprehend vocabulary, to read with speed or comprehension, turn in retaliation to objective tests. With students who seem better able to afford extracurricular entertainment than their teachers are, some faculty almost seem to take bitter satisfaction in refusing to amuse or interest their students.

It is as if the economic distress of English teachers has translated itself into a concentration on those very aspects that probably appealed least to us when we first took an interest in literature and writing. Emulating the hard sciences and business classes, which enjoy relative success in today's academic market, the English teacher gropes for computability, for quantitative coloration, perhaps in the hope that imitation of the proper

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academic butterfly will somehow insure survival. In so doing, we abandon what drew many of us to literature in the first place--its ability to entertain.

As an undergraduate, my initial reason for choosing an English major was, quite simply, that I liked to read. Reading provided escape, an imaginary world into which I wandered every time I had a spare moment. Far from following the antiseptic study-skills advice about quiet surroundings and uninterrupted concentration, my own experience was that I liked to read in a variety of totally non-ideal settings--while I was waiting for a bus, escaping irritating television commercials, waiting for my laundry to dry, or eating in a busy restaurant. There was nothing methodical about the way I read; I learned to wolf down passages whenever I could, devouring whole chapters when I had the luxury of a long stretch of free time. This pattern is fairly common among people who really enjoy reading; they read whenever they can, they read with almost total absorption, regardless of the surroundings, and they read primarily for amusement.

The notion that reading can provide tidbits of portable entertainment is not popular among literature or study-skills teachers. This concept is nevertheless valuable, particularly in light of the most influential forces in forming students' ability to follow and derive pleasure from narratives, namely the visual media of television and movies. A number of media specialists have pointed to the fact that the attention span of television-bred young people is about as long as the program time in between commercials. Some also argue that this type of entertainment is insidious because it is passive. Certainly it is passive in terms of the verbal responses required, or perhaps even in terms of the intellectual activity. However, it often brings the emotions into active play. We can observe the contorted faces

of the television or movie viewer--the slight grin in answer to actors' smiles, the frowns of anxiety and tension, the round eyes of surprise--all of which demonstrate how thoroughly many viewers identify with the characters and situations they are watching. An essential factor in a work's entertainment value seems to be precisely this capacity for arousing emotion, for absorbing the reader (or viewer) into complete participation and loss of distance.

Even with avid readers, this kind of total involvement is relatively rare. Some teachers of literature tend to look down on what they see as the cheap thrills of video entertainment, and a number of English departments will not acknowledge the literary potential of film or videotape. Film courses creep into the curriculum only if they are escorted by respectable literary works and comparative analyses. Showing students videotapes or films of works they are reading is still considered "cheating" by many teachers, since the students don't really have to work at absorbing or enjoying the narrative. I would argue that both the visual and the written versions have important places in the English teacher's classroom. These places are different, and in order to understand what each medium has to offer, it is important to examine these differences, even to face up to the fact that one medium may do something better than the other.

Researchers in the audiovisual field have expended a great deal of energy to prove that the use of films, in conjunction with traditional methods, do help students learn more efficiently. John Moldstad's "Selective Review of Research Studies Showing Media Effectiveness" point to the fact that the use of audiovisual aids, particularly films, results in increased learning in most cases.[1] Such studies neglect the problem of the differences between the amount and kind of learning that takes place when students read and when they view film or television. Do students gain more knowledge and

stronger impressions from reading a play, for example, or from viewing the play on videotape? Will having students view the videotape accomplish anything that simply having them read for the same period of time will not?

In order to explore these questions, I presented an excerpt from Arthur Miller's Incident at Vichy to two groups of students, one of which read the excerpt and one of which viewed the same excerpt from the PBS production, directed by Stacy Keach. The excerpt was a self-contained unit with a fair amount of information to be absorbed, as well as a kind of emotional climax. After the students had read or viewed the excerpt they answered questions designed to test their comprehension and also the emotional impact of the two kinds of presentation. In a humanist's naive stab at scientific procedure, I even gave the two groups of students a preliminary set of questions intended to insure that the two groups did not vary significantly in their attitudes toward viewing and reading or toward the subject matter of the excerpt. A clear majority in both groups indicated that they enjoyed reading, and a slightly larger percentage of each group stated that they, like Peter Seller's Chance Gardener, "like to watch." Both groups of students received instructions to pay attention to detail because they would be questioned afterward. They then read a brief description of the situation, after which they read or viewed the excerpt.

The story takes place in a detention center in Vichy, France of 1942. Von Berg, a German prince, and Dr. Leduc, a Jewish psychiatrist, have both been picked up to have their papers checked. Rumor has it that the Jews who are picked up are going to concentration camps in Germany. Von Berg claims that he is in no way responsible for the activities taking place in Germany; he says that he even considered suicide as a response to the horror of Nazi Germany. Leduc argues that Von Berg participates in the persecution

of the Jews through his own passivity. He goes on to point out the fact that Von Berg's Nazi cousin, Baron Kessler, was responsible for Leduc losing his job (along with all the other Jews at his hospital). When the time arrives for Von Berg to leave the detention center with his pass to freedom, he presses Leduc to take the pass and flee. The play ends with the police captain staring in amazement at Von Berg, who has sacrificed his own safety for the slim possibility of a total stranger's escape.

After reading and viewing this excerpt, both groups took identical tests, consisting of two sets of questions. The first set included short answer questions to test comprehension of the basic facts presented in the excerpt. The second set, based on a semantic differential scale, dealt with the intensity of the students' emotional response to the characters, the situation, and the play excerpt as a whole. On the more general comprehension questions, the two groups did not vary significantly. However, when the questions called for a more precise recall of detail, the reading group did much better than the viewing group. For example, twenty-two of the readers responded correctly to the question, "What does Von Berg seek from Leduc?" Only eleven of the videotape viewers were able to answer this question precisely by saying that Von Berg seeks his "friendship," a direct quote from the play. Another question ("What kind of doctor do you think Leduc was?") demands close attention to detail. Only the student who notices that Leduc talks about the patients he has "analyzed" will be able to deduce that he is a psychiatrist. Of the reading group, eleven students answered correctly, whereas only two students from the viewing group gave the right response. A question on what Leduc sees when he hears Kessler's name also demands exact recall of the detail. Seventeen readers said that Leduc sees a knife, the very words of the character, whereas only five viewers were able to

remember his words. The one question that received more correct responses from the videotape viewers than from the readers was "Who had thoughts of suicide?" Thirty-one viewers answered that it was Von Berg; only twenty of the readers answered correctly. What accounts for this single exception? Perhaps some analysis of the emotional response questions may lead to a possible answer.

Of the ten questions in the second set, four yielded markedly different results from the two groups. In indicating how the play made them feel, the students who viewed the videotape demonstrated a wider range of reactions than did the reading group. Twice as many readers as viewers indicated "no feelings." No readers marked "very happy," whereas two of the viewers indicated this reaction. Perhaps even more significant than these responses were the differences between the two groups' assessment of how interesting they found the play. Two of the readers found the play "boring," but no viewers found it so. Only three students from the reading group thought the play was "very interesting," while eleven of the viewers felt it was very interesting. The last two questions asked whether the play had brought about changes in the students' attitudes toward Jews and Nazis. Twice as many viewers as readers felt "more positive toward Jews," as a result of watching the play. Nine viewers indicated that the play made them feel "more negative toward Nazis," but only four readers said that the play made them feel this way.

The results of my quasi-scientific experiment support what many teachers may have realized simply by listening to people's comments about reading and movie or television viewing. Students do seem to have stronger emotional emotional reactions to visual presentations than to the printed word. On the

other hand, they seem more likely to remember the details of what they have read. The single comprehension questions that was answered more successfully by the viewing group was one dealing with the emotionally charged subject of suicide. The reading group was otherwise able to answer questions on details more precisely than the viewing group was, often using the exact word or words from the text of the play. The viewers of the videotape seemed to find the play more interesting and emotionally affecting, and a higher percentage actually changed their opinions as a result of viewing the excerpt.

If the emotional appeal of video presentations is obvious, why do we see a growing resistance to these and other enhancers, in the wake of the sixties machine boom? We may trace much of this apprehension about visual entertainment to a fundamental suspicion of technology, a basic dislike for the machine. This is ironic, if we consider the fact that literacy became widespread only when the printing press, another machine, made the printed word accessible to the masses. The prejudice against machine entertainment has far-reaching implications. We see hatred of the machine in some teachers' refusal to allow tape recorders or music in their classrooms, in their suspicion of computer-assisted instruction, or their fear of word processors and computerized editing systems. Hiding behind the skirts of humanism is an unreasoning fear of the unknown, a feeling of inadequacy, and a fear for survival in the face of these mechanical devices.

Another source of this disdain for the entertainment value of the machines (be they film projectors, videotape machines, tape recorders, or word processors) is a basically Puritanical suspicion of any work that is fun or easy. Pleasure is inherently suspect because of its association with sloth and evil. A pervasive idea in our culture is the notion that there is

a distinct division between work and play, and that work is of necessity difficult and tedious. With the counterculture movement of the late sixties came the idea that tedious work was not necessarily good, nor was good work necessarily tedious. Despite the validity of these ideas, many academicians still see an inverse correlation between a literary work's entertainment value and its literary prestige. Comprehensibility and intellectual status are at odds, and we therefore look down on anything that makes our most idolized enigmas more accessible to the masses.

How contrary this notion is to the conception of many of the greatest authors. Imagine how horrified Shakespeare might be if he knew that his plays were now strictly "high-brow" material, primarily read rather than watched. Film, videotape, and television have the potential to make masterpieces comprehensible to popular audiences and, indeed, a number of students comment that they decided to read a book after having seen the movie version. Some films may lead students to works no more delectable than Jaws, but a few films may prompt students to read Steinbeck, Joyce, or Faulkner. In recent years, many books have become successes after the movie versions have appeared. Some teachers are afraid that if people watch a story, they will have sucked all the entertainment from it and discard it like an empty orange rind. This is simply not the case. Just as strong as the desire for something new and different is the appeal of the familiar. Despite (or perhaps because of) our cult of the throw-away and the disposable, people still take pleasure in that which is permanent, in that which returns. We take delight in our recognition of variations on familiar themes and stories. For many students, each repetition or review of a tale brings a greater sense of mastery, and the books they enjoy most are the ones they have experienced in the greatest variety of media.

Some teachers are less concerned with the student's enjoyment of literature than with making reading and writing skills quantifiable. If this is the case, then rejection of machines logically follows, for it is clear that many of these mechanical devices paradoxically stir the emotions more than they do the mechanical skills. They do not necessarily make students better at answering objective questions on the details of a text. Perhaps it is this hint of frivolity, in the midst of belt-tightening times, that makes today's English teachers leery of such devices. Regardless of the teacher's response to machine invasions, we must acknowledge that students generally find various machines to be entertaining enhancers of the written word because of their emotional appeal. The question still remains: why bother to make literature and writing entertaining? Perhaps the answer lies in our struggle for survival as a discipline. When possession of a home computer and videotape machine become the most important status symbols of an entire generation of youngsters (a process that may be going on right now), teachers of literature and writing are going to become academic dinosaurs if they do not catch up with their students and learn how to exploit the entertainment and educational value of technological advances. To wonder if videotapes, films, computerized editors, and cassette tapes will replace us is as ridiculous as wondering if the typewriter will replace the writer. The tools of technology are waiting for our use, and if we can make our subject more beautiful, more moving, more comprehensible, and more entertaining, by all means, let us rush to get out hands on these tools. The real strength of our discipline lies not in its quantifiable or practical aspects but in its ability to delight us, to move us--in short, to entertain us.

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[1]John Moldstad, "Selective Review of Research Studies Showing Media Effectiveness: A Primer for Media Directors," Audio Visual Communication, 22, No. 4 (1974), 387-397.